DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 591 CS 216 533

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TITLE Gender Issues in Children's Literature. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 1998-00-00
NOTE 4p.
CONTRACT RR93002011
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Indiana University, 2805 E. 10th Street, Suite 150, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Literature; Elementary Education; *Reading Material Selection; *Sex Bias; *Sex Fairness; *Sex Role; *Sex Stereotypes
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Arguing that children's books play a significant part in transmitting a society's culture to children, this Digest discusses how gender roles are portrayed in children's books. It begins by discussing how the genders are portrayed in children's literature, and then addresses the question of why gender-representation in children's literature is significant. The Digest also discusses what teachers should keep in mind while selecting children's books, and how teachers can use children's literature to promote gender equity. Contains 8 references. (RS)

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Gender Issues in Children's Literature

by Manjari Singh

Everything we read...constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men (Mem Fox, 1993).

Besides being an important resource for developing children's language skills, children's books play a significant part in transmitting a society's culture to children. Gender roles are an important part of this culture. How genders are portrayed in children's books thus contributes to the image children develop of their own role and that of their gender in society.

How is gender portrayed in children's literature?

Gender bias exists in the content, language and illustrations of a large number of children's books (Jett-Simpson & Masland, 1993). This bias may be seen in the extent to which a gender is represented as the main character in children's books and how that gender is depicted.

Numerous studies analyzing children's literature find the majority of books dominated by male figures. For example, Ernst (1995) did an analysis of titles of children's books and found male names represented nearly twice as often as female names. She also found that even books with female or gender-neutral names in their titles in fact, frequently revolve around a male character. Many classics and popular stories where girls are portrayed usually reflect stereotypes of masculine and feminine roles. Such gender stereotypes are prevalent not only in mainstream children's books but also in Newberry and Caldecott medal winners.

Children's books frequently portray girls as acted upon rather than active (Fox, 1993). Girls are represented as sweet, naive, conforming, and dependent, while boys are typically described as strong, adventurous, independent, and capable (Ernst, 1995; Jett-Simpson & Masland, 1993). Boys tend to have roles as fighters, adventurers and rescuers, while girls in their passive role tend to be caretakers, mothers, princesses in need of rescuing, and characters that support the male figure (Temple, 1993). Often, girl characters achieve their goals because others help them, whereas boys do so because they demonstrate ingenuity and/or perseverance. If females are initially represented as active and assertive, they are often portrayed in a passive light toward the end of the story. Girl characters who retain their active qualities are clearly the exception (Rudman, 1995). Thus, studies indicate that not only are girls portrayed less often than boys in children's books, but both genders are frequently presented in stereotypical terms as well.

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Why is gender-representation in children's literature significant?

Many researchers and authors argue that readers identify with characters of their own gender in books. Therefore, the relative lack of girl characters in texts can limit the opportunity for girls to identify with their gender and to validate their place in society.

The manner in which genders are represented in children's literature impacts children's attitudes and perceptions of gender-appropriate behavior in society. Sexism in literature can be so insidious that it quietly conditions boys and girls to accept the way they 'see and read the world,' thus reinforcing gender images (Fox, 1993). This reinforcement predisposes children to not question existing social relationships. At the same time, however, books containing images that conflict with gender stereotypes provide children the opportunity to re-examine their gender beliefs and assumptions. Thus, texts can provide children with alternative role models and inspire them to adopt more egalitarian gender attitudes.

Gender stereotypical roles are constraining to both genders. Just as girls are trapped in passive and whiny roles, boys and men are rarely described as people demonstrating emotions of sadness and fear, having hobbies/occupations that are not stereotypically male and in roles where they aren't competing or meeting high expectations. These stereotypes limit boys' and girls' freedom to express themselves (Fox, 1993; Rudman, 1995) and pressure them to behave in ways that are 'gender appropriate' rather than ways best suited to their personality.

What should teachers keep in mind while selecting children's books?

Ideally, all children's books used in the classroom should have well-rounded male and female characters. However, teachers

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seldom have much control over the children's books they use as their selection of books is often restricted to what is cheap, easily available, or contributed by parents and well-wishers. Despite these constraints, it is possible to take active steps to ensure the use of books that promote gender equity among the sexes.

One recommendation is to look actively for books portraying girls/women in a positive light with active, dynamic roles. Another suggestion is to look for books and stories that do not portray either gender in a stereotypical manner. Rudman (1995) recommends gender-neutral books where

- individuals are portrayed with distinctive personalities irrespective of their gender
- achievements are not evaluated on the basis of gender
- occupations are represented as gender-free
- clothing is described in functional rather than gender-based terms
- females are not always weaker and more delicate than males
- individuals are logical or emotional depending upon the situation
- the language used in the text is gender-free, etc.

Teachers can also choose books that have counter-sexist attitudes imbedded in them, such as feminist texts that can help children recognize gender-stereotypical messages. Combining traditional and non-traditional books can also spark discussion of how genders are portrayed in different books (Jett-Simpson and Masland, 1993).

Regardless of the type of book chosen, the message of respect for both genders should be subtly contained in the texts. It is important to avoid books that have strident messages on gender equity, as children tend to reject books that preach. In Mem Fox's (1993) words, "laboring the point kills the point of the laboring."

How can teachers use children's literature to promote gender equity?

Before using strategies to identify gender stereotypes and develop gender-equitable perceptions among children, it is important for teachers to first recognize and articulate their own attitudes (Rudman 1995). Then they can guide children to be critical by using scaffolding strategies like the following:

- collectively analyzing gender assumptions in the text
- raising questions about main characters and their portrayal.
- asking children to reverse the genders of individuals, e.g., "What if Sleeping Beauty was a boy?" (Temple, 1993)
- having children guess a writer's gender on the basis of the story they have just heard (Lawrence, 1995)
- asking children to use gender-neutral names in the stories they write and read this aloud to other students so that they can guess the protagonist's gender (Lawrence, 1995)
- have children adopt the opposite sex's point of view about a very gendered issue (Lawrence, 1995)

Children can discuss a novel by participating in the above activities in heterogeneous groups. It is important for teachers to support children's group discussions by posing thought-provoking questions and facilitating student exchanges. McGowan, McGowan & Wheeler (1994) have described a number of children's books that can be used as catalysts for discussions, and suggested different group activities for primary grade students. The authors have designed these activities for the purpose of promoting gender awareness and using them to explore issues such as: respect for yourself and other individuals, similarities and differences between boys and girls, traditional and non-traditional gender roles, gender stereotypes, and friendships between boys and girls. Along similar lines, Lawrence (1993) suggests getting older students to conduct surveys and create collages to sensitize themselves to gender issues they encounter in books they read.

Trites (1997) reminds us that during discussions with children, it is important to validate both feminine and masculine voices, and to listen to dissenting individual opinions. Teachers need to recognize that many children may have attitudes that are gender stereotyped only towards certain issues. Students need to be allowed to make choices that are consonant with their own personalities and which are self-empowering. It is also important to keep in mind that rethinking gender roles cannot be achieved in a day but is an ongoing process.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract RR93002011. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.